THEATER

# L.A.P.D. leaves 'No Stone' unturned

## *Out of chaos comes avant-garde theater*

**NO STONE FOR STUDS SCHWARTZ,** a performance by Jim Beame and the Los Angeles Poverty Department (Theater of the Homeless); directed by John Malpede in collaboration with Bill Kerr; lights by Jason Berliner; presented by Pipeline at the Boyd Street Theater, 301 Boyd St., downtown Los Angeles, 8 p.m. Fri/Sat through Feb. 7. Tickets: $8.50. Information: 629-2205.

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| Studs | **William Aaron "Jim" Beame** |
| Thief | **Julius Jenkins Jr.** |
| Alda/Irving | **Kevin Williams** |
| Studs II | **John Malpede** |
| Tiger Flowers | **Frank "Bad Boy" Christian** |
| Banducci | **Carl Bunker** |
| Deborah Kerr | **Ella Arce** |
| Fettucini | **Bartholomew Bridges** |
| Joe Skinner | **Brian Young** |
| John | **Marlon Payton** |
| Zelda | **Pat Perkins** |
| Killer | **Apolo Severs** |

**By Richard Stayton**
Herald theater critic

**William Aaron "Jim" Beame,** center, is a skid-row murder victim in "No Stone for Studs Schwartz," the Los Angeles Poverty Department's latest production.

Pipeline production's artistic director Scott Kelman argues that the Los Angeles Poverty Department is "the only true theater ensemble in town." Kelman has a legitimate argument. The L.A.P.D. is now presenting its second "play" in less than a year at downtown's boyd Street Theater, but this free-floating crapshoot of a company has been working together even longer. What's most intriguing about their current effort, "No Stone for Studs Schwartz," is how such barely controlled chaos survives at all — either on the Boyd stage *or* on the streets — yet alone as a committed company of performers.

The L.A.P.D. is composed of actual "street people": poor folks who live on our city's sidewalks or in our downtown flophouses, wrecked cars, abandoned refrigerator boxes — or wherever else they might find temporary, inexpensive (preferably free) shelter. Founded in 1985 by New York performance artist John Malpede, the L.A.P.D. has gradually become a very loose "ensemble."

"No Stone for Studs Schwartz" was collectively developed much in the manner that the avant-garde ensemble Mabou Mines develops material. One member of the company — in this case William Aaron "Jim" Beame — conceives the story to be told, and then the remainder of the company contribute towards that personal vision. All contributions are welcome, but can be discarded or accepted by the piece's originator.

This time out, their contemporary experimental style resulted in a dreamlike tale of a homeless man who's shot and killed on an L.A. street. Just as in Billy Wilder's "Sunset Boulevard," the corpse begins talking about his murder. Then Studs rises and we're back in time with this fugitive outsider, fixing prizefights, fleeing the mob, hiding out on Caribbean islands while hoping to reach Brazil, then somehow fighting Arabs in Israel's six-day war, and even more mysteriously ending up at our own Union Station for the ritual killing.

Is it Beame's life story? If so, then why does he play a character named Studs Schwartz? Is is Beame's alter ego? Does it matter?

A valuable program note helps us venture into this alien terrain: " 'No Stone for Studs Schwartz' may at times appear ambiguous, elements of reality and fantasy indistinguishable. Relax . . . you only have to deal with it for little over an hour. They have to live with it every day."

L.A.P.D.'s first public presentation, "South of the Clouds," was primarily the expected series of autobiographical solo performances. Just getting up on a stage and confessing life experiences seemed fulfilling for everyone: Doing so gave the homeless self-respect and dignity, while also providing an audience with insights into the mysteries of that lifestyle. While watching "South of the Clouds," one realized that there are enormous human resources being wasted by our society and that none of the fashionable cliches about the homeless truly represent the reality.

But very little in "South of the Clouds" prepared us for the epic maelstrom of "No Stone for Studs Schwartz." In a weird artistic jump, L.A.P.D. has gone from realistic theater of "South of the Clouds" to post-modernism. There is only one theater working in America producing work similiar to "No Stone for Studs Schwartz": New York's ruthlessly avant-garde Wooster Group. In the Wooster's "L.S.D.," controlled chaos is manufactured. In the L.A.P.D.'s "No Stone," controlled chaos is a given. So are multiple identities, simultaneous time, synchronicity, and all the other subjects being explored by the Wooster Group.

It's now obvious that Malpede and company are after work that's much more ambitious than socially relevant therapeutic theater. There is nothing safely liberal or politically "correct" here. For sheer dramatic intensity, ferocity and *danger*, no other current play on a local stage can compare to L.A.P.D.'s. The black South Africans who performed "Asinamali" at the Taper last year somewhat resembled the raw defiance of L.A.P.D., in part because those "actors" were also untrained amateurs drawn by social necessity to the theater. If Malpede can keep his crew together, then maybe L.A.P.D. will eventually add craftsmanship to their anarchic energies.

But that's a big "if" and a huge "maybe." Much of the excitement of "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" depends on the player's turbulent, agitated lifestyles. As these 13 or so players merge text with improvisation, fictional character with personal mood, scripted plot with impulsive gesture, an audience is acutely alert to the creative and the life processes.

The streets are this group's theater. Survival is their rehearsal for "No Stone." It's the city's chaos that creates the company's dangerously agitated state of mind. Onstage, a fight might break out at any moment. One member shouts an epithet at another, and there's an edge to the curse that transcends acting, that emerges from some personal vendetta.

Co-director Malpede is perpetually present, "acting" as Beame's "double," simultaneously performing and directing. His eyes never rest, always darting like hunters, wary for the next unscripted eruption. He comments, prompts, engages, warns, goes silent — always reacting to the waves made by his players.

Meanwhile, the entire L.A.P.D. company remains visible next to the stage, laughing at the missed lines or the ad-libs made by those "in character."

"Is that true or not?" Malpede asks Beame.

"I don't know what's happening!" Beame responds honestly.

And the L.A.P.D. players howl with laughter.

Then Beame is embracing his woman (Elia Arce), crying, "Stella! Stella! You gotta listen to me — I'm supposed to be playing this like it's 'Streetcar Named Desire'. . ." Again the L.A.P.D. roar like a Greek chorus in an Aristophanes comedy.

When a black hotel operator boasts, "We run here a very high-class place for white people," you suspect he's heard this line more than once before in Los Angeles — and the L.A.P.D. cries of "Oh, yes!" reinforce that suspicion.

Just as in story theater or an encounter session, chairs are the only props, becoming airplanes, cars, restaurants, taverns. The light operators are constantly frustrated as the performers ignore their stage marks, and yet the missed cues and half-shadowed visuals actually bring even more poetry to the cumulative effect.

Finally, Schwartz/Beame is lying on his back on the stage. A killer (Apolo Severs) shoots him. A thief (Julius Jenkins Jr.) is picking his pockets for cigarettes, spare change, anything of use for survival on the streets. And then the ghost of his father hovers over Schwartz.

"Saul, this is your father," says Frank "Bad Boy" Christian in a lyrical rhythm. "You're 13 years old. Take it slow. Hang with your own kind. . . . This is your father speaking, Saul . . ."

The moving eulogy is beautifully spoken by Christian, but it's the turbulent, improvisational, "found" poetry that makes "No Stone for Studs Schwartz" so fascinating.

For instance, last Saturday night, L.A.P.D. members Irene Adams and Sunshine never arrived for the performance. Where were they? On a bender? In jail? Beaten unconscious during a mugging?

Without missing a beat, Bartholomew Bridges put on a red dress and assumed Irene Adams' role. And a glance at Bridges' biography hints at why he so effortlessly shifted character: "Sometimes it seems I'm so many people rolled into one . . . like a Tootsie Roll Pop."

But gradually during the "play," I became aware of Bridges as an angry, frustrated figure who wasn't entirely performing "in character." Exiting the theater, I found Bartholomew Bridges seated by the door, fuming.

"I lost $26 tonight," Bridges said. "I had it under my wig and dropped it and one of them picked it up and kept it. I know I'm not going to get it back. That's what he meant by 'Finders keepers, losers weepers.' But I can't afford to lose $26."

That's chaos on the streets and in the theater, L.A.P.D. style. It's not for everyone. Nor is it for an audience which one member, in a pun of Thorstein Veblen, labeled: "The Leisure and the Theory Class." Conspicuous consumption could never be L.A.P.D.'s *modus operandi*.